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C O N F I D E N T I A L VALLETTA 000251

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/WE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/04/2019

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SUBJECT: MALTESE OFFICIAL SAYS TWO INFORMAL MOSQUES CLOSED  
FOR ZONING INFRACTIONS

REF: 07 VALLETTA 423

Classified By: Charge' Davis for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) In a May 20 meeting with Charge' and acting DCM, Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) Chairman Austin Walker gave his perspective on the closure last month of two informal mosques in the seaside towns of Sliema and Bugibba. Walker explained that in both instances, Maltese citizens who were Muslims had rented apartments in residential blocks and then opened them up to other Muslims for use as places of worship. This was a violation of zoning regulations, and as complaints from neighbors escalated, MEPA officials had informed both groups they could no longer use the apartments for that purpose. In the case of the Bugibba site, the Muslim group had been formally notified of the need to close some 18 months ago (reftel); the Sliema group had been so informed more recently.

¶2. (C) Earlier this year, Walker related, after being approached by the MEPA Ombudsman, MEPA had decided it had no choice but to enforce the closure of both sites. The same week, however, the Commissioner of Police had called to inform MEPA that it had charged the leaders of both mosques with the crime of "using a private residence for non-residential use without a permit." The Commissioner asked that MEPA wait until the criminal case was settled before taking action.

¶3. (C) Walker said he was initially sympathetic to the request from the police, but that on further consideration and discussion within MEPA, came to realize that MEPA had its own responsibilities vis-a-vis the complaining neighbors. It was against this background that MEPA moved to seal the doors of both properties. In the case of the Sliema site, worshippers for several Fridays running held their prayers on the seaside promenade outside their former mosque as a protest.

¶4. (C) Mr. Walker noted that both congregations were private groups that had no connection or relationship with Malta's sole "official" mosque, the much larger, Libyan-funded Corradino Mosque in Paola. He said that while Malta does "safeguard" the Catholic religion as the state religion, the Maltese nonetheless support the right of people of all other faiths to worship freely. He regretted that perception in some quarters that "racism" had been behind the decision to close the informal mosques and said that ignoring zoning regulations and holding demonstrations to protest their enforcement "don't help the Muslims." Walker reported that he and his officials had urged the leaders of the two mosques to identify "suitable" properties for their congregations (MEPA regulations require places of worship to have, inter alia, private entrances, meaning that residential apartments are by definition not acceptable).

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